Sipping & Swooning
A 'Sweet Heat' Holiday Novella
KARMEN LEE

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&
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CONTENT NOTES

Here are a few notes for what you'll come across in this story. No spoilers intended, but just so you know what you are getting into. Feel free to skip ahead if you don't want to read over these warnings!

This book has on-the-page sex scenes.

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1

Janelle

“I don’t want to be here.”

No matter how many times I told myself this, the facts didn’t change. I was going to a strip club for the first time in my life, and I wouldn’t even be able to enjoy myself. I had no problem with strip clubs or strippers. I even made sure to pull out money from the ATM and exchange a few twenties for ones.

I turned off the car but didn’t move to get out.

The problem wasn’t that we were going to a strip club. The problem was it was a *male* strip club. I, Janelle Love, did not do penises. I didn’t want to see them, and I certainly didn’t want them anywhere near me. I liked men just fine as friends but nothing about penises excited me. Combine that with the fact that the wedding was on Valentine’s Day, and I had found myself very much single for the first time in seven years, and you had a shit sandwich for the ages.

My little sister, Kelly, knew this of course. I knew she wasn’t the one who had set this up. That honor belonged to her best friend and the bane of my fucking existence, Constance. If not for how much I knew she loved Kelly, I would have pushed her into traffic. But that would have left Kelly without a matron of honor and even though I was the maid of honor, with the number of hours I was pulling at work, I knew I didn’t have the availability that she needed to help finish planning the final details of the wedding. I had thought it strange when Kelly asked both of us to be in the head bridesmaid position, but as planning had gone on, I could admit that the decision made sense. I didn’t mind opening my checkbook to pay for various deposits and Constance being a stay-at-home wife made it easy for her to accompany Kelly as needed.

Plus, having Constance there to help in person meant I didn’t have to come face-to-face with my ex-girlfriend, Monica. Things were awkward

enough with her being in the wedding. I could only handle so much without needing to find a nice dark corner to go hide in. Still, if I had taken more time off to actively help plan, maybe I wouldn't have found myself sitting alone in a parking lot when I would have much rather been home on my couch with a bottle of my favorite beer and a good cheesy romance.

When Constance had told me to meet them at a strip club, I hadn't been the slightest into it. If not for knowing how the other women could get, I would have bowed out. But they were a rowdy bunch when they got worked up and I wasn't keen on bailing Kelly out of jail a day before she was set to tie the knot. Her fiancé, Mitch, probably would have laughed it off but I knew Kelly and my parents would be mortified and I would probably face the blame as the older sister even if I wasn't involved. So, I had begrudgingly agreed to join them as the designated babysitter for the night. At least the place we were going was known for having good non-alcoholic drinks. I had made sure to look it up in the hopes of bolstering my argument for why we should go anywhere else. Just because I wasn't planning on getting sloshed didn't mean I wanted to get stuck downing only water for the night.

With a final sigh at the shitshow my life had somehow become, I opened the car door immediately gagging on the thick air that rushed in. Summer in Georgia was well underway which meant leaving the house dry and coming back home wet for less than pleasant reasons. I was glad I hadn't bothered straightening my hair that morning. In the short time it took me to walk from my car to the club's entrance, my hair would have puffed up and looked a hot ass mess. Already I felt my cheeks warming which meant my make up would probably run off my face before the night was through.

I resigned myself to being hot and irritable for most of the night as I walked up to the front door. My plan was simple; hand Kelly the ones I brought, grab a coke, and post up at the bar where I could watch out for the group and not get pulled into their shenanigans. I didn't need them getting too carried away within the first ten minutes. We had the table reserved for three hours which should be enough time for them to get a few eyefuls and satisfy their need for pre-wedding foolishness.

I handed the bouncer my driver's license. He looked at it before glancing up at me. I sighed when he narrowed his eyes at me in disbelief. I knew exactly where this was going. It was always the same no matter where I went but even after being subjected to it for the past seven years, the whole thing still grated on my nerves.

"It's not a fake and yes, I'm legal. I'm just short."

The guy, Jeff, according to the nametag on his chest, barked out a rough laugh. "Short and you look like you're twelve."

"Not much I can do about genetics." It was the same conversation I always had when trying to get into a place with an age limit or ordering an alcoholic drink. "I was supposed to be taller, but the inches got lost somewhere."

"I see." He held up a flashlight and scanned it over my license.

Something was telling me I should have just stayed home after all. Kelly would forgive me eventually. "Would you like me to call my parents so they can verify the year I was pushed from the womb? I have it on good authority I was a couple days late."

He didn't respond to my snark, instead handing me back the card and waving me in. "One sign of trouble from you and I'm tossing you out."

"Trust me," I said tucking my card back in my purse. "I wouldn't mind that at all. I don't even want to be here." He raised an eyebrow at me but didn't respond as I walked past him into the club.

Inside, the front hall was dim with only the barest amount of light coming from the doorway in front of me. The music beyond was muffled and I took a deep breath in before continuing further inside. The room I entered was large and darker still with neon lights coming from the stages around the room and various displays and light fixtures on the walls. It wasn't the first time I had been to a strip club, but it was my first time in this one, so I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go. I knew Constance had handled the booking, but I was the first one to arrive it seemed. Not for the first time, I cursed my need to be early to events. Normally it didn't matter to me if I was walking into a location alone, but I was already

dreading the night, so arriving ahead of everyone left me even more off-kilter.

I should have just met them at the hotel first and taken the Uber. I had opted to handle some extra work at the office before coming so that I would have the entire weekend free as well as the Monday after. But it meant dealing with the awkwardness of being the only person here and I was pretty sure one of the rules of the club was keeping your phone in your bag.

"Can I help you?"

I nodded to the hostess. "There should be a reservation for Kelly. I know I'm a little early."

The woman glanced up at me with a smirk and I almost did a double take. She was attractive in a way that would have had me sneaking glances had I come across her elsewhere. Her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders in loose flowing waves. Her lips were curled in a smile that spoke of the best kind of trouble and her dark eyes were kohl-lined making them stand out even more against honeyed skin. I couldn't tell how tall she was, but the arms she had casually resting on the counter looked toned under the lamplight illuminating the space.

"Never known someone to be early for a lap dance. You that eager to get started?"

I grimaced. "Not even a little." My response must not have been what she was looking for because her smile fell slightly. "I mean, I'm here for my sister's bachelorette party. I'm sure the guys are lovely, but they're not really my type."

The woman cocked her head to the side and gave me a considering look. "There's a lot of guys here. How do you know none of them are your type?"

"Because they're guys."

"Ah." I didn't know what to make of that small huff of air, but before I could say anything else, a familiar voice called out from behind me.

“I told you she got here first.” I turned in time to be swept into familiar arms and I snorted when I already smelled the scent of tequila.

“Tequila already? Really guys?” I leaned back smiling softly to take the bite out of my words as Kelly pouted. I didn’t trust that look for a second. Puppy dog eyes wouldn’t work on me tonight. “Don’t give me that look. You already smell like taco Tuesday and it’s a Thursday.”

A soft chuckle reminded me that I had been having a conversation before getting distracted. By the time I turned back around, the hostess had stood and walked around the counter that had been between us. I found myself looking up and promptly having the urge to climb a tree. The woman was tall, though to me, most people were. Her frame looked solid in a way I always admired. Gym girls were hot and while I wasn’t a fan of working out, I could appreciate the dedication it took to get up and go.

“This must be the group?” She asked. I nodded gesturing at the other women. “Are you expecting anyone else or is this everyone?”

“This is everyone,” Kelly said with a wide smile. Something about that smile had me narrowing my eyes. “Wow, you are gorgeous. Are you dancing too?”

The woman laughed and shook her head. She waved for us to follow her, and I fell in line gladly. Kelly looped an arm through mine and pulled me up to the front. I frowned at her but followed obediently. We walked past couches and a couple of smaller stages before stopping.

“This is y’all’s home for the evening. I’m the main bartender for the night, but you’ll have Rafael assigned to your area so feel free to let him know what you need.”

I nodded trying not to seem so obvious as I looked her up and down. Even the dim lighting couldn’t hide the jeans that hugged her long legs and curved softly over her hips. I knew it was rude to stare, but it was damn near impossible to look anywhere else. “What’s your name?” I asked before I could stop myself. The corners of her eyes crinkled when she smiled.

“Alice.”

“Well, Alice, you have been an amazing help,” Kelly said. “Are you single?”

“Kelly,” I hissed as the other women giggled. Alice’s smile didn’t change but I gave her a small shrug in apology. “Ignore my sister. I promise she has a filter. She just forgets how to use it sometimes.”

Alice nodded but she thankfully didn’t seem offended. Sadly, she didn’t answer the question either before turning to leave, and I wasn’t about to repeat it after having scolded my sister for the same thing. When she had moved far enough away that I was sure my voice wouldn’t carry, I turned to Kelly.

“What the hell was that? Why did you ask if she was single?”

Kelly raised an eyebrow. “Are you serious? Sis, you were giving her the eye.”

“What eye?” I asked. “There were no eyes being given.”

Constance spoke up from behind Kelly. “What are you guys doing? Come sit down so we can get started. These ones aren’t going to throw themselves.”

Kelly’s attention quickly turned from being weird about Alice to giggling about the guys who were sure to come. I felt another sigh coming on, but I fought against it before sitting down and steeling myself for boredom. I looked up surprised when I realized I could see the main bar across the room from where we were sitting. Even with people walking around, I had a relatively clear view of Alice. She moved with the type of effortless grace that had only been forced into me after years of ballet; an attempt by my mother to force my two left feet to finally cooperate with one another instead of sabotaging me.

When the first guy came out, a loud cheer went up from our booth and I couldn’t help but smile at how carefree Kelly sounded. Despite my reservations, I knew she needed a night to let loose. Wedding planning was difficult enough, but Mitch’s mother had been a literal nightmare. The woman had tried to veto the wedding dress Kelly chose, change the catering menu because she wanted different options for sides, and invited herself to the cake tasting. Dealing with her was one of the few times that Constance’s

abrasive personality was a good thing. She didn’t give two shits about that woman liking her and I could appreciate that when it was not turned my way.

I sat back and pulled the wad of bills from my purse. This wasn’t my kind of scene, but I wasn’t about to be the damper on Kelly’s parade. This night was about her. Having a clear view across the room to the eye candy that was Alice was just a bonus.

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2

Alice

“Look alive. Table three wants twelve more Jägerbombs.”

I winced at the thought of downing that. A glance at the table in question told me everything I needed to know. Thankfully despite them being high energy, no one looked too intoxicated.

“How many rounds have they had? Two?”

My cousin, Patrick, was the waiter assigned to them tonight. It was sometimes annoying working with a family member, but I couldn’t deny it was helpful to have an ally in the disappointment that we brought our parents by choosing jobs that weren’t seen as prestigious. Even with him paying his way through nursing school by working here a few nights, his parents still gave him shit. I didn’t doubt that they thought I was a bad influence considering I was the one who had told them we were hiring.

“And they were sober when they came in, so I think they’re good. Unlike the rowdy mess that is table twelve.”

I snorted but couldn’t help the way my gaze drifted in that table’s direction. It was just because I was keeping an eye on them, not because of the tiny terror that stood out like a cold drink on a fucking sweltering day. I had been kicking myself for the past hour for not having gotten her name before I left them. I had been too busy having a talk with myself about how guests were and had always been very much off-limits.

Normally that wasn’t a problem. Most of the women who came to the Sin Den were here for the dancers. The *male* dancers. They weren’t here for the very not male bartender. Sure, I didn’t think all the women that came in were straight, but none of them had ever expressed any interest my way especially not when Rory came out in his suit that never stayed on for very long. I was strictly into women, but even I could appreciate the snake-like waves that he had on lock. It also helped that he was a perfect gentleman who had the most adorable habit of showing off pictures of his wife and

kids to anyone who paused long enough to listen. The guy was the quintessential family man when not throwing it back on the pole.

“You alright?”

I jerked back to attention at Patrick’s question and cut my eyes away from that damn table. “Yeah. Totally good.” Patrick’s eyebrow was raised but I turned away before he could say anything more. I poured out the shots as more cheers erupted from parts of the room. The night was still young, but I knew we had three more bachelorette groups coming in later.

June was a heavy month for us thanks to all the weddings that took place. I usually worked overtime which normally provided me the funds to take July off and still top up my savings. My parents were still miffed that I preferred this to corporate law, but I often told them it was a much cleaner line of work, and I stood by that. At the club, the guys stripped, the customers made it rain, and everyone went home happy. Sometimes there were minor hiccups, but they typically resolved themselves quickly. I couldn’t say the same for the few years I was practicing. Law was messy, especially when working for people with more money than sense.

When I slid the tray of shots to Patrick, I was startled to realize he was still staring at me. I scowled not liking his interest. He had the type of personality where you wondered how he didn’t wander into traffic until you had the full force of his attention on you. Then, you realized you’d been played by someone way too observant for his own good. I didn’t doubt that he would make a great nurse when he graduated.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“You’re acting weird,” he replied. “Why are you acting weird?”

I chuckled and shook my head hoping to throw him off the scent before he realized just why I was off my game tonight. “Not acting any weirder than normal, Pat. Can’t a woman just have an off day?”

He stared at me for a moment longer before clicking his tongue. “For an ex-lawyer, you’re not as good of a liar as you think.” Before I could think of anything to say in response, he picked up the tray and made his way to the table in his assigned section.

With a sigh of relief, I wiped down the counter and let myself relax. Time between drinks were few and far between, especially with us being down a bartender. Hailey had sounded all sorts of terrible when she called out a couple hours ago though and I had no desire to catch whatever it was she had. The club was on the smaller side, and with how handsy people were, all it took was one sneeze to have us shut down for deep cleaning. Fall and winter flu seasons were hell.

“You owe me for giving me the rowdiest table of the night,” Rafael said as he walked up to the bar. I was placated from worrying by his still relaxed expression. It wasn’t often that we had to kick groups out for going overboard with the partying, but it had happened once or twice since I started working here three years ago. “If they didn’t tip so well, I would tell you to switch me out.”

I chuckled. “Are they really that bad?”

He shrugged. “Not really. But the vertically challenged one seems completely immune to my charms. That has to be a crime against humanity. I’m fucking adorable.”

With a roll of my eyes, I tried not to let that bit of information affect me too much. Despite what Rafael said, this wasn’t the first time someone recognized him playing up his boy-next-door good looks to swindle them out of additional tips. To be fair, he was a damn good waiter, so he probably deserved the tips to begin with.

“Which one is that?” I asked teasing him. “I’ll send her a drink on me.”

“Of course, you would, asshole,” he said before putting in his order. Just to tease him more, I added that extra drink tapping the tray when I finished.

“Make sure you give this one to the woman with good taste.” At his scowl, I laughed and shooed him away watching as he returned to table twelve. The cheers that went up had me chuckling until I saw just who he handed the extra drink to.

“Oh fuck.”

It was *her*.

When she looked up at me, I swore I could feel a little zing snap through the air. Without thinking, I nodded confirming the drink was from me. I saw her eyes widen slightly and her lips part and damn if I didn't wonder if they were as soft as they had looked. My mind took off, flashing through scenario after scenario where those sinful lips were parted for other reasons, and I found myself helpless to do anything but imagine. What would she look like in pleasure? Would she pant and moan or would she cry out unabashedly?

"You have it bad."

I sighed under my breath as I forced the images to fade from my mind. "Fuck off Patrick."

Time went by at its normal pace and yet even with as busy as we were, she was still on my mind. For a moment, my attention was split between Patrick coming for an order and the keg needing to be changed. When I had a moment to breathe, I almost choked on an inhale because there she was standing at my bar looking a little bit awkward and a whole lot beautiful.

"Um…hey." It wasn't like me to be tongue-tied. I was known as the silver-tongued bitch by my friends particularly when we went to the club expressly looking for the type of fun I wanted with this woman. I hadn't fumbled over my words since the first or second time I asked another woman out. That I was doing so now was blowing my goddamn mind and not necessarily in a good way. "Everything alright? Did you all need something else?"

The woman shook her head. She glanced back at the table where her friends were still cheering on the dancer, none paying attention to the conversation we were having at the bar. "I think they're good. I just wanted to get a moment to breathe and give my ears a break."

I chuckled at that. Customers did get pretty into it, and I couldn't completely blame them. It was nice to let go a little every now and then. "Understandable."

She sat down on one of the stools. “And I wanted to come and thank you for the drink.” When she looked up at me from beneath dark lashes, I nearly dropped the glass in my hand. “Are you sure it’s okay for it to be free? Rafael said something about busting his balls that I didn’t quite understand.”

My snort was soft, as I shook my head. “Totally fine. You deserved it after knocking his ego down a few pegs. I wasn’t sure what you liked so hopefully it was good.”

“Tequila sunrise, extra grenadine, and an extra slice of orange,” she said quickly. She looked down when my eyes widened. “That’s my favorite drink order…for next time.”

For next time. Those words could have meant anything, and yet all I could think of was how much I wanted there to be a next time. We were silent for a moment, and I filled the time by wiping down the same bit of bar that I had been wiping since I started. I could have turned away. Lord knew there was still shit for me to do. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to learn more about…

“What’s your name?”

The woman jerked slightly at my abrupt question. “Janelle.”

I stuck my hand out. “Nice to meet you again. Alice.”

“I remember your name,” she said with a wide smile. When her hand fit in mine, I almost lost it at how warm and soft her skin was. “Sorry if our group is a little rowdy. It’s my little sister’s bachelorette party so her friend group is a little keyed up.”

“It’s all good. Nothing we haven’t seen before,” I replied hoping to ease some of her worries. Her group really hadn’t been as bad as any of the others we’d had. “You said your sister’s friends? They aren’t yours?”

Janelle shrugged. “They’re her sorority sisters and friends from college so I know them. But they’re all a few years younger than me, so I never really hung out with them. I work a lot these days and barely have time for my own.”

I nodded in understanding. My own free time was scarce these days though I knew I would make up for it next month by only working a couple weekends. “Adulting doesn’t tend to leave a lot of time to relax, does it?”

I heard her snort as she took a sip of her drink. “Not even a little, especially when pulling seventy-hour weeks.” She saw me wince and gave me a half smile. “The glamorous world of law. It pays the bills though I think the dollars are extracted from my life force.”

“And that is why you need to loosen up.”

I looked over as one of the women from Janelle’s group bounced up beside her. Her dark brown hair rested at the top of her shoulders in an asymmetrical bob. She was attractive with big doe eyes and soft features, but she had nothing on Janelle.

“I am loose, Constance.” I coughed softly at Janelle’s words before turning around like I needed to get something else. “I’m here having fun with the rest of you.”

“No,” the other woman countered. “You are hiding out at the bar instead of making the night fun for your sister. Honestly, I know it must be rough with your baby sister getting married before you but think about how she must feel. She already had to stress about having your ex-girlfriend there. She deserves a break after dealing with Mitch’s mother all week.”

I raised my eyebrows as I continued to listen in. It was probably wrong of me, but people routinely forgot that bartenders were people and often let slip all sorts of information that they probably shouldn’t. Unless it was something illegal, or really fucking gross, I tended to just let people talk while I worked and listened. Now, I wanted to know more about Janelle, though I did feel a little guilty getting information from a third source that she didn’t seem to be that fond of.

“Then go back to the table and have fun. I just came over to thank Alice for the drink and to grab an energy drink to keep me awake.” At that, I leaned down to the fridge and pulled one out to help with her story. I didn’t know if she really did intend to ask me for one, but I wasn’t getting good vibes from this interaction and I wanted to bring an end to it so I could ask some questions of my own.

“Here you go,” I said breaking into the conversation before it could get going again. Janelle smiled at me with a nod of thanks, and I returned it. I looked over at Constance and gave her a cool look. “Can I get you something? Did you all need another round of shots?”

With a put-upon sigh, she shook her head. “In about twenty, we would love to get those flutes of champagne to toast the bride-to-be.”

I plastered on my customer service smile. “Not a problem. I’ll let Rafael know.” Constance glanced at Janelle one more time before turning away with a huff. I watched her walk back to the table before turning my attention back to Janelle. “Well, she’s certainly something.”

Her snort this time was loud enough for me to hear. “That’s putting it mildly.”

I knew I should leave well enough alone, but I was curious about the conversation they’d had, and I wanted to know more. “Is your sister marrying your ex or something? That sounds like some Reddit-level shit.”

Janelle shook her head. “No. Kelly is straight.” She glanced up at me. “But she is marrying my ex’s brother so…”

I winced. “Damn. How the hell—” I cut myself off before grabbing a bottle of tequila and two shot glasses. Janelle reached out to stop me.

“I’m only allowed one drink tonight since I’m supposed to be the one responsible for keeping the group in line.” She laughed when I cursed again and let her know what I thought of that. “I know. I should have asked someone else to do it, but I don’t mind. It’ll keep me from doing something ridiculous like drunk dialing my ex-girlfriend and either asking her to take me back and telling her to go to hell.”

She had a good point. I had never drunk dialed anyone, let alone an ex, but I knew plenty of people who had. It never seemed to turn out well. “Well, fuck her. You’re better off without her.” I grabbed a bottle of water and held it out. “Cheers to dropping a hundred plus pounds of dead weight.”

Her laugh this time sounded genuine, and I felt my chest warm at having been the cause of it. “I appreciate it, though the cause of the breakup

is the same reason I’m—” She cut herself off. “No. I said I was not going to talk about her tonight.”

I nodded. “Then don’t. Tell me more about you. What do you like? Who is your favorite member of BTS?”

Janelle chuckled and the sound washed over me making me lean closer.

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3

Janelle

Alice's attention was more than a little flattering. Under the dim light of the bar, I found myself damn near spilling out my entire life's story. Then again, wasn't that what bartenders were known for? Being sounding boards for your ills and providing a non-judgmental way to speak your truth?

Or maybe I needed therapy. Probably both.

I didn't spend a lot of time in bars given my schedule. But I had heard about them enough from friends and I knew a few of my colleagues had favorites that they always frequented. Would it matter if I came to this one more than once? I mean, sure it was in a strip club, but I wasn't here for that. I was here to talk about everything I couldn't say in the light. And Alice hadn't stopped me. She was even providing commentary in between mixing up drinks with the type of flair that had me wondering just how talented her hands were in other situations.

"So, let me get this straight," she said when I had paused. She wasn't looking at me, instead her gaze was on the round of tequila shots Constance had come back up and asked for. I felt a small pang of guilt at spending more time at the bar with Alice than I was at the table with Kelly and the other bridesmaids, but I was having far more fun here. Actually, this was the most fun I'd had in a long while including before the breakup. That fact had me paying closer attention.

"Your ex-girlfriend's brother is your sister's fiancé?" Her eyes widened when I nodded. "And you and your ex are both in the wedding? You sure you don't want to have more than one drink?"

I let out a huff of laughter at her tone and words. I shook my head at her offer of another drink even though it was more than a little tempting when I remembered that not only was my ex in the wedding, but that we would be walking in together. The whole thing sounded like a scenario right

out of a movie. And yet here I was dealing with it on my own. “That’s exactly it,” I replied. “Monica and I dated first, but Mitch and Kelly felt a spark during the meeting of the families. The rest is history, I guess. It was super weird at first, but I guess it’s not really an issue anymore.”

Alice nodded. “Damn. That sucks though. I know it can’t be easy to deal with that.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said. “I’m an adult, so I can handle being around her with—”

“You don’t have to downplay it,” Alice said cutting me off. I looked up at her in surprise. Her gaze was steady as she looked at me. “It’s a shitty situation. Anyone with half a shred of decency could understand why you might need some time to deal with it.”

Something in my chest loosened. My friends had asked how I was after Monica and I had split, but no one in my family had breached the topic. They had all been either too busy with Kelly’s wedding or just didn’t know how to bring it up. Either way, this was the first time I was really getting a chance to discuss it and surprisingly, it felt good to bring it up to someone I didn’t know at all. But whether it was because it felt good to talk to a total stranger or whether it felt good to talk to Alice remained to be seen.

“Thank you,” I said looking down into the bottle of water she had given me after I finished my drink. When she gave me a quizzical look, I elaborated. “You’re the first person who’s really acknowledged that the whole situation isn’t…ideal.”

“Your sister hasn’t said anything? I thought the two of you were close.”

I shook my head. “We are. I just think she’s a little afraid to. Plus, her mother-in-law is a bit of a pain and it’s usually easier to just not rock the boat. The woman didn’t like me as is.” That was an understatement. Monica’s mother had disliked me from the moment she knew I existed. It had thrown a shadow over our relationship throughout the years. Thankfully, Mitch had been different standing up for me whenever their

mom threw little jabs my way. Now that I really thought about it, he had stood up for me far more than Monica ever had.

Damn. That realization was a surprise. It's not that Monica had never pushed back with her mother, but when I really stopped to think about things, the moments had been too far and between by comparison. *How had I not seen that?*

"Still," Alice continued. "She should've said something at least especially given the wedding is in, what, a day?"

"It's fine," I insisted. "It's not her fault that her relationship worked out and mine didn't. Mitch is wonderful to her. They truly fit and I couldn't be happier for her."

Alice looked at me for a moment before smiling. "You're far more gracious than I think I would be if I were in your shoes."

The compliment warmed me, and I opened my mouth to thank her, but before I could get the words out, I heard my name being called.

"There you are sis!" Kelly shouted as she bounded up beside me. She was all wide smiles and nearly vibrating with excitement. Seeing her that way made my words even more true. I knew it was going to be a test in patience to have to not just have to see Monica at the wedding but also walk with and be in pictures with her, but I would do my best. "We're done and ready to head back to the hotel. Stop flirting and let's go."

My cheeks heated and I glanced at Alice before shushing Kelly. "I'm not flirting, Jesus. Thanks for listening to me ramble, Alice. I really appreciate it."

Alice held up a hand waving off my thanks. "It was no trouble on my end. I enjoyed—"

"What's taking you guys so long?" Constance interrupted. It took an act of God to keep me from gnashing my teeth together. I turned to her with a forced smile.

"We're coming." Everything in me wanted to stay and talk to Alice more. I had spent most of the time talking about myself and not enough time asking about her. I wanted to know more. Was she an only child? How

did she become a bartender at a male strip club? Did she like women and could she see herself liking me? There hadn't been enough time, but I wasn't sure asking for her number was an acceptable thing to do. She was a bartender, so maybe being nice and asking questions was just part of her job. The thought that she was just doing her job had me deflating. "It was good to meet you, Alice."

She nodded and smiled sending the butterflies in my stomach into a frenzy, but I forced them to calm. "Likewise, Janelle." She paused for a moment her gaze drifting over Kelly before coming back to me. "Take care of yourself, alright?"

I let myself be pulled away even as I wanted to fight against the hand on my arm. It wasn't until we were back outside, and I was standing by my car that I let out a deep breath. It was ridiculous to feel so taken with someone I had just met. Clearly, I needed to get out more and meet people. Alice was just being nice and doing her job. Nothing more, nothing less.

~*~*~

"My life is over!"

I sighed before leaning over and wrapping an arm around Kelly. Her groan sounded pained, and I knew she had to be hurting after a night of nonstop drinking. Seeing her so torn up made me glad that I had chosen to be the voice of sobriety instead of partaking myself. Plus, a little too much liquid courage might have had me doing something I shouldn't like flinging myself across the bar and pressing my lips against a certain attractive bartender and thereby getting myself thrown out for confusing niceness for interest.

"Your life is not over. You just have a hangover," I said patting Kelly on the back. She shook her head before glaring at me.

"Not the alcohol, sis. The drink service that was scheduled for tomorrow cancelled this morning. Something about food poisoning and everyone getting sick."

Oh shit. I hadn't known about that. Handling the food and drinks wasn't part of my duties. I was responsible for keeping Kelly's things in order on the day of and making sure she didn't vibrate out of her skin with

anxiety. Now though, I would understand if she lost it. We couldn't have a reception and no drinks after explicitly mentioning it would be an open bar.

"Well hell," I said with feeling as she dropped her face back into her hands. "There has to be someone who is available tomorrow afternoon."

"I've called the last two services I had in my book to see and neither one of them were available tomorrow," Kelly whined. "Everyone is booked, and my wedding is going to be a total disaster. I just know it. Mitch's mom is going to blame me or say she knew he should have listened to her and ignored what I wanted. Maybe we should just postpone the whole wedding."

I shook her shoulder until she looked back up at me. "Now, hey. Don't even joke about that. You are not giving that woman the satisfaction of thinking she was right about anything. There has to be something we can do." I thought quickly as she looked up at me with her big brown eyes. I was the big sister here. I had to have a way to salvage this. "Have you checked with the hotel to see if they have a list of backup vendors available? They might know someone who can come in on short notice."

Kelly sniffled before swiping a hand across her face. I winced when I saw her mascara smudge.

"No. I didn't think of that."

I patted her hand. "It's alright. Let me see what we can do." Before she could say anything else, I grabbed my phone and pulled up the hotel event coordinator's number. I sent up a silent prayer that she would have something we could do to salvage this. If not, I didn't see any way around this short of buying drinks to serve ourselves and hoping that years from now, it would just be a funny story Kelly and Mitch could tell their children.

Eloping probably would have been a much better plan.

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4

Alice

Weddings were annoying, but I wasn't going to turn down an easy gig. After hanging up the phone, I made a mental note of all the things I needed to prepare before tomorrow. I would have my usual crew join me. The hotel was one that often called on us as backups when things went sideways, so at least I knew the score and wouldn't need to much time to get things prepped.

"Who was that?" Patrick asked as he walked up to the bar. "Don't tell me you were chatting with the cutie from last night?"

"Who?" I knew exactly who he was talking about, but I didn't want to let him know that. He was annoying as fuck on the best of days, never mind when he was trying to mastermind some shit that needed to be left well enough alone. If not for the fact that he was my cousin, I would've told him to fuck off. But his mom, my aunt, would've told my mom and then that would have been a whole headache. I loved my family dearly, but they were nosy as fuck and didn't always know how to not meddle.

Patrick raised an eyebrow like he knew I was bullshitting him. Hell, he probably did, but if he wanted to be all up in my business, I was going to make him work for it.

"You know exactly who the fuck I'm talking about."

I shrugged before turning my attention back to taking inventory. I knew the perceived dismissal would piss him off and I smirked when I heard him click his tongue, a telltale sign of his annoyance.

"I'm pretty sure I don't. You should probably be more specific?"

He smacked his hand down on the bar counter. "The woman you were chatting up. The cutie with the curls. You know exactly who I meant you little shit." I chuckled at his tone before turning around to look at him.

“Oh, her.” My words had him bristling and I laughed before putting him out of his misery. “No, I was talking to Gladys over at Hotel du Monde. Apparently, the bartenders originally hired for a wedding tomorrow got sick so she was asking if we could fill in on short notice. You in?”

Patrick nodded but he still looked at me like he wanted to say something smart. “I’m available. Sadly. So, you haven’t talked to her.”

With a sigh, I shook my head. I knew he was talking about Janelle and yeah, I wanted to be talking about her. I wanted to be talking *to* her, but my dumbass had let her walk out the door before I could fix my lips to tell her how much I enjoyed our conversation and wanted to continue. By the time my brain came back online, and I realized I was a fool to let her walk out without saying something, they were gone from the parking lot headed to wherever. I didn’t even get which part of the city she lived in other than the generic Atlanta.

Hell, that could’ve meant anything from Norcross to Vinings. I was kicking myself for second guessing things instead of just throwing out my own self-imposed rule about not getting involved with customers especially after having already known she was into women. Given Janelle’s reluctance about coming to the club to begin with, I doubted she would be back. That left me pissed at myself and no way of figuring out how to find her.

Fingers snapping in front of my face brought me back out of my thoughts and I scowled at Patrick. “Don’t you have work to do?”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “You were the one staring into space. What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing.” I knew he didn’t believe me, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to talk about Janelle when there was no way to find her again. It was dramatic as fuck to be so upset about that fact, but it was what it was. She was a gorgeous woman who seemed incredibly intelligent and didn’t talk at me like I was just someone around to serve her. I knew the stereotypes about bartenders being a friendly ear, but sometimes I just wanted to serve drinks and not get talked at especially when those same people would often turn around and disparage my job.

Patrick hopped up to sit on the stool in front of me. “Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you well.” He had me there. Patrick wasn’t just a cousin or coworker. He was one of my best friends. I knew if I didn’t come clean, he would more than likely pester me for the rest of the day if not the entire weekend. I didn’t need that kind of frustration when I was already annoyed at myself.

“Fine,” I said finally before pausing my counting. “I was thinking about Janelle, the woman from last night. But before you get your panties in a twist, I never got her phone number or anything. I kept it strictly professional.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

I chuckled though it lacked much amusement. That was a question I kept asking myself every time I thought back to the way the light hit Janelle’s curls, or how her hands seemed to flutter when she got into telling a story. All in all, we couldn’t have spent more than an hour together, but that hour was tattooed in my memory along with the sweet smile she gifted me when I expressed shock and understanding at her recent break up. I was still convinced her ex-girlfriend was a fool.

“Because I am a professional,” I said finally before ducking under the bar and walking towards the back hallway. I wasn’t surprised when I heard him following me. When Patrick got going, he usually didn’t stop until he felt the situation was swayed in his favor. It was entertaining to watch until it was turned in your direction. “Really Patrick, I have shit to do and I know you do too.”

When I turned around, he was standing in the doorway of the storage room, arms folded as he glared at me. I didn’t get why he cared so much. Sure, it would have been nice to get Janelle’s number and maybe ask her out. But life would eventually go on. If it sucked for a little while, that was to be expected.

“I just want to see you boo-ed up and happy. That’s all.” I gave him a grateful smile that he returned. “Plus, I would love to give the family shit for thinking you fucking women was just a phase. Love not being the only gay cousin.”

I laughed at that and his smirk. My mom's family was generally great, but occasionally they got a bit too churchy when it came to Patrick and me. Loved them to death though, and they had come a long way from where they were when he and I both came out in a joint announcement via group text. That had been a fun few days.

"Of course, you do. You crave the violence of familial drama."

"And you don't?" He asked raising his brow at me. "You were right there listening in along with me when Jamie's mistress found out she and his wife were both expecting at the same time. Don't play."

I didn't bother trying to deny it. Even my dad had been in the thick of things trying to hear what was going on when our cousin's two worlds collided, and at the family reunion no less. It had been all anyone talked about even after the kids were born and his wife kicked him out. I shook my head and turned back to the stock. "Whatever. Help me with these boxes so I can get shit ready for tonight and tomorrow."

That was probably the best thing I could do to get my mind off Janelle. I had a job to do, and I could only hope that the familiarity of work would help the memory of her smile fade from my thoughts.

~*~*~

Hotel du Monde was as beautifully gaudy as ever. I had never actually stayed in one of their suites, but I had heard from friends and coworkers that they were nice; the kind of place that was perfect for Valentine's Day. I was a bit shocked that someone was holding their wedding on the holiday, but then again, it was the holiday of love. Maybe they thought it would add a little good luck to the whole shebang.

Patrick nodded to me as he worked on getting the boxes of champagne inside. The ceremony wasn't supposed to start for another couple hours, but after, there was going to be a cocktail hour before the main reception. People would be coming in to enjoy the free bar and I made sure to let the other servers and bartenders know when and how to cut people off so that no one got too out of hand.

"Alice, thank you so much for filling in on such short notice." I smiled and reached out to shake Gladys' hand. She looked visibly relieved

at everything being set up. “When the bride’s sister called me, I could hear how distressed she was.”

“I can imagine,” I said with a nod. Having a whole team down sick was a nightmare scenario. “We’re happy to help.”

“Especially if the food is good,” Patrick said in passing with a charming smile. I rolled my eyes, but Gladys laughed in clear delight. For someone so gay, he sure knew how to charm the ladies. Gladys swatted at him as he walked by.

“Your cousin is a mess. Anyway, come and let me introduce you to the maid of honor. She got here early, and I know she would feel much better about reassuring the bride that everything is handled if she sees you in person.”

I nodded in understanding. It probably was a stressful few hours between hearing about the change and knowing there was a solution. I didn’t begrudge the woman for wanting to meet me and have her fears fully assuaged.

“Not a problem. The guys can handle themselves for a bit,” I replied before following her down the hallway. I ran my hands over my suit making sure there were no wrinkles. Some people got weird when they realized I was in charge of things, especially when they were expecting a man. Even other women. The suit was my favorite and it seemed to give me an extra air of authority. It was a weird power game to play, but the looks I usually got when in it went a long way at soothing my ruffled feathers.

“Ms. Love, this is Alice Lim, our hero of the hour.”

When the other woman turned it was like everything moved in slow motion. I could see the curls that created a halo with flowers placed here and there. It should have looked childish, but when Janelle was facing me, all I could think was it suited her. She was in full bloom in a loose dress with similar flowers. The material shimmered as she turned, and the fabric fell softly across curves that I hadn’t been fully aware of the night we met. When our gazes met, her eyes widened, and her lips moved though no sound came out.

Time seemed to stretch out between us though realistically I knew only a few seconds had passed. I forced myself to move holding my hand out trying to make all of this seem normal. It wasn't, but I couldn't let Gladys think anything was wrong. The wedding was starting soon, and we didn't need any more hiccups. *Professional damnit. I am a professional.* The thought steadied my voice and my smile as I greeted the one person I had resigned myself to never seeing again.

"Nice to meet you Ms. Love." Janelle looked down at my hand and for a moment I wondered if she was going to walk away and leave me hanging. Hell, I wasn't sure if she even remembered me even though we had only met a day ago. The club had been dark, and while the bar and front area were much brighter, I knew firsthand that what someone looked like in the dark wasn't exactly what they looked like in the light. "I'm looking forward to servicing the wedding today. I promise you we have everything handled for your sister's big day."

She nodded slowly before reaching out and returning my handshake. Her hand was warm, and I felt every bit of her skin against mine. The smile she gave me in return left me tingling as we separated. Professionalism be damned. There was no way I was letting Janelle leave without speaking to her one more time. I didn't believe in fate, but I refused to throw away my second chance.

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5

Janelle

Shock didn’t even begin to cover how I felt as I stood in line waiting to make my way down the aisle. Seeing Alice had sent a wave of emotions through me the least of which was *damn*. When I had turned to see her standing there in a suit that fit in all the right places, I hadn’t known what to say. And when she had smiled and stuck her hand out, all I could think was how much I wanted to see her out of it. I felt gaudy and a little childish standing in front of her in a bridesmaid dress I didn’t like and flowers in my hair like I was some type of fairy.

I should have pushed back more.

Kelly had wanted the garden theme for her wedding and that desired aesthetic had extended to what we wore. For her, that translated to tiny diamond butterflies clipped onto her curls and a princess gown that shimmered every time she breathed. She looked breathtaking and when I had shed a small tear, that wasn’t an overreaction. Seeing her standing there radiant and full of happiness almost made up for the fact that I was now beside my ex-girlfriend as we waited for our cue to make an appearance.

“Janelle?”

I had to fight not to sigh when Monica quietly called my name. With a smile I did not feel, I glanced over at her. “What?”

It was unfair that even after having broken up with me, I could still look at her and find her attractive. Her slender frame was accentuated by a form-fitting suit, but I was happy to note that instead of dwelling on it, my mind compared Monica to Alice and found her lacking. All I could think about was how much better it would have been had I been on Alice’s arm as we walked in front of my friends and family.

The thought was startling but brought a genuine smile to my face. I had expected to feel upset at this point, and while it was certainly uncomfortable, overall, I felt okay. More than okay. The strongest emotion I

felt was excitement about watching Kelly walk down the aisle and start her life with a man I knew loved her as much as she loved him. Everything else —the past relationship and new uncertain future with Monica—was unimportant by comparison.

Monica seemed taken aback by my abrupt reply. In the past, I would have immediately apologized and changed my tone. Now though, I let it stand. I didn't care if it made Monica feel some type of way. I had promised to be civil for Kelly and I planned to keep that promise. But civility didn't mean being extra nice or engaging when it wasn't needed. I didn't know what she intended to say because right when Monica opened her mouth to speak again, the processional music started, and everyone moved into position. I looked ahead pasting a smile on my face. I could feel Monica's gaze on me, but I didn't spare her another glance.

The walk down the aisle was nothing compared to the joy I felt watching Kelly walk in. Her smile was radiant as was Mitch's when he gazed at her. I felt something in me lift as I watched them exchange vows. I wanted that—that excitement of just seeing the other person. I realized now that Monica and I hadn't had that for a long while. Somehow over the years, we had settled into a pattern that didn't suit me anymore. I was ready for a fresh start, and I knew who I wanted to try that with.

All through pictures and entering the reception, I was consumed with the thought of going back to Alice and asking her to dance, talk, anything really. I wanted more of the easy conversation we had shared a day ago. I wanted to be the one asking her questions this time and find out what she liked. I wanted to see if the tension that had slowly built between us was there in the light.

"Janelle."

I sighed and glanced over. The line for drinks was long and I had been so buried in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed Monica following me. "Yes?"

Her expression didn't change but I could tell she wasn't pleased with my nonchalant response. *Tough titties,* I thought to myself. When the line moved, I turned back around and shifted forward. The sway of people opened up a line of sight to the bar and when Alice turned around, I found

myself smiling. She had taken off the suit jacket and rolled up the sleeves on her collared shirt. The few unfastened buttons left a silky-looking patch of skin open, and I wondered if it was as soft as it looked.

When she looked up, our eyes met, and I swore a zap of electricity popped off between us. I nodded to her and felt warmth infuse me when her lips curled up in a soft smile that lit up her entire face. It was so different from the first sharp smile she had thrown my way in the club but had the butterflies in my stomach still beating a furious rhythm with their wings. That smile had promised all the dirty things that made my blood sing and my breath come faster. This smile promised happiness and laughter. I wanted to taste it and see if it was as energizing as it felt.

"What is she smiling at?"

Monica's voice was like nails on a damn chalkboard and I covered up my annoyance by moving up in line again. The closer we got to Alice, the more I wanted to run up and say everything I was feeling. I had been too shocked when we met again earlier to do much of anything other than shake her hand and jet back to the bridal suite. I planned to remedy that now. It wasn't until we were close enough to speak that I realized Monica was talking about her.

"Alice, hi."

"Hey." Alice's gaze shifted to Monica before it moved back to me. "Sorry about how abrupt our first hello was earlier. We were still getting things set up. How are you doing?"

Her explanation soothed something in me that I hadn't realized was there—the worry that I was reading far too much into our interactions than I should. I shrugged with a nonchalance I didn't truly feel as I decided to take a chance and go for it. "Can't complain. Saw Kelly get married. Saw you again. It's been a great day so far."

Alice's smile widened and I felt my own lips stretch wider. "Is that so? I'm part of your day being great?"

"You might be one of the main reasons…depending." This was delightful. It had been so long since I flirted, and I found it came easier than I thought. At the club, I had been too nervous, too overwhelmed with

everything that had been happening. Now, I felt lighter and ready to move on to something worthwhile. “I was surprised to see you here, but I can’t deny that I’m happy about it.”

Alice chuckled softly making the hairs on the back of my arm stand up. That sound would be even better if it was breathed into my skin. I wanted to wrap it around me. When her eyes went half-lidded, I nearly choked on my own breath. Her hands never stopped moving even without her looking down and I wondered, not for the first time, what it would feel like to have those deft fingers stroking over my skin.

“Would it be bad if I said I felt the same way?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I—”

“Can I get a drink now?” I scowled as Monica’s voice cut through the air like a fart in a locked car. Alice cut her eyes to the side, smile slipping slightly.

“Of course, what can I get for you?”

Monica gestured towards me. “You forgot to take her drink order.”

“I already know what she would like,” Alice replied before turning back to me. Her hands never stopped moving as she pulled out ingredients. “Tequila sunrise, extra grenadine, and an extra slice of orange. I paid attention.”

I giggled when she answered my unspoken question. Even after years of being together, Monica always forgot my favorite drink order. It seemed like something so small and yet it had me thinking about all the other ways Monica didn’t pay attention. I was quickly discovering that I had let far too many things go for the sake of keeping the peace.

“I never thought you didn’t,” I said reaching out for the drink Alice placed in front of me. It looked perfect and refreshing and when I took a sip, I couldn’t hold back my slight moan of enjoyment. The crisp tart of the orange juice invigorated me, and I smiled widely. “This is perfect.”

Alice looked more than a little pleased. “Then the two of you pair well.”

“This is horribly unprofessional.” When I glanced at Monica, I saw her fists were clenched, and I could tell she was seething. Her eyes narrowed as she looked back and forth between Alice and me. She seemed to see something that had her sneering. “Are you really sinking so low as to shack up with a bartender? Really, Janelle, I know our breakup had to have been hard on you, but that’s no reason to go slumming.”

“Excuse me?” I asked clenching my hand around my glass. She had a lot of nerve talking about me slumming. “I’m not the one who got caught —”

“Lower your voice,” she said glancing around. I bristled. If not for remembering we were at Kelly’s wedding, I would have tossed my drink and maybe a table. It was yet another reminder of a red flag I somehow ignored in our relationship. The way she would say something with no care for my feelings and when I responded in a way she disliked, I would be chastised for drawing attention to us. It was bullshit, and I wasn’t going to stay quiet anymore.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Monica took a step back as if surprised by my words. “I know you. You wouldn’t—”

“You don’t know a damn thing about me, Monica,” I said cutting her off. “Not anymore. And who I decide to be around is none of your business.”

Monica reached out grabbing my wrist and it took everything in me not to throw her off. “Janelle, be reasonable.”

“Fuck you.” I hadn’t meant to be so loud, but I could tell my voice carried when others started turning to look. We were drawing a crowd and while normally that would have had me slinking off to find a corner to hide in, I was livid enough to not give a fuck. I moved to say something else, but a hand on my back stopped me. I turned, my eyes widening when I saw Kelly and Mitch at my back. Kelly looked at me and then down at where Monica still had a hold on my wrist. Her eyes narrowed but her voice was steady when she spoke.

“What is going on here?” I could almost feel the hardness in her voice. “Monica.”

Monica clenched her jaw before letting go of me. I pulled my arm back before massaging my wrist. “We were just having a discussion.”

“Mitch, hun,” Kelly said though she never took her eyes off Monica. “Perhaps you and your sister need to have a conversation.” I could tell by her tone that this wasn’t a suggestion. This was a demand, and I was happy when Mitch moved placing a hand on Monica’s shoulder.

Kelly turned to me then with a fierceness in her eyes that nearly brought tears to mine. “Could you do me a favor and grab my bag from the upstairs suite?” She handed me a key card. “Alice, Ms. Gladys was also looking for you. She said it was urgent.”

When I looked at Alice, the warmth in her eyes shocked me. I wanted to dive into those pools of warm brown and get lost until I felt like my whole self again. When she came around the bar, I felt my body yearning to lean into her. There was a magnetic force there that was seductive. I didn’t want to deny it.

“I can show you where the elevator is,” she said offering me a hand. I looked down at it knowing that the moment I took it, that was it. I was in this. Alice’s expression didn’t change letting me make the decision and that sealed it for me.

I placed my hand in hers and followed her out of the room.

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6

Alice

The moment we left the reception area, a flip switched, and Janelle began moving like a woman possessed. I didn't know where we were going, and yet I dutifully followed her not bothering with questions. When we were out of the sight of prying eyes, I found myself pushed against a wall. All thoughts of Gladys disappeared when our lips met in a kiss that had more hunger than I had ever felt. I didn't question it, falling into her like she was air. I cupped my hands around her cheeks loving the smooth silk of her skin. Her lips were petal soft and delicious as were the soft hums of pleasure she let out. When we pulled away, her dark brown eyes were tinged with heat. Nothing needed to be said as she took my hand again and strode off down the hallway.

The determined glint in her eyes had my gut churning with the need to touch and be touched. The kisses we had exchanged had only teased my appetite and now I wanted the main course. I let my eyes roam as she pulled us down the hallway. The dress she had on wasn't the most form-fitting, but the material laid across her curves in a way that made me want to reach out and touch. When I realized that I could, that it was encouraged, I damn near brought us both to our knees. It wasn't until we were in the elevator on our way up that I realized we were completely alone. There was no one here to see us and that made me bolder than I had any right to be.

As soon as the doors closed hiding us from the rest of the world, I made my move.

"What are you doing?" Janelle asked as I shifted, taking her hands in mine, and pushing them up above her head. The position had her back arching, and I couldn't help but gaze down at the way her breasts strained against the fabric rising and falling in quick succession with each of her breaths. I wanted to lean down and feel the swell of them against my cheek.

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked with a crooked smile. Her gaze was steady even as her breathing sped up and I watched her eyes widen as I

leaned in. Her breath washed over my face in quick pants, and I was relieved to only catch the faintest scent of citrus and tequila. “Surely I don’t need to explain?”

Janelle blinked for a moment and time stood still. Even though she had initiated this, I wasn’t about to hold it against her if she had changed her mind. It was one thing to get lost in a momentary heat of passion. It was another to actually take it a step further and fall into bed together. As much as I wanted to feel those shapely legs wrap around me, I found myself wanting to take things at her pace.

“We don’t have to—” My words were cut off when lips pressed hard against mine. A groan came from somewhere as I let myself move with the feeling. I nibbled on her bottom lip smiling when her mouth parted letting me in. The taste of her was exquisite like expensive wine and fine dining. I sipped from her letting her essence fill me until I wasn’t sure if our flavors could ever be separated.

When the elevator dinged announcing we had reached a floor, I reluctantly pulled away surprised to see that at some point, one of Janelle’s thighs had slid between my own. The feeling of that strength against my fabric-covered pussy had me inhaling deeply. We needed to get behind closed doors immediately before I did something that would no doubt get us tossed out on our asses.

“Please tell me you have a location in mind. I think management would throw us out if we were caught fucking on the elevator floor, but I’m getting close to not giving a fuck.” Which would be a shame. I did a lot of weddings at this hotel, but damn if Janelle didn’t make it almost worth it just to have her in my arms.

Janelle smiled though she still looked dazed. When she flexed her arms, I removed my hands letting them fall by my sides. She took one hand in hers and once again became the leader. We were both silent as we passed by other rooms. I wished I could see inside her mind, but all I could do was watch and hope that we were close to wherever she was taking us. When we stopped at a door, the sense of anticipation nearly took me to my knees.

The suite inside was larger than I expected with a living room and then a set of double doors that I figured led to the bedroom. As soon as I

stepped across the threshold, I once more found my arms full of sweet-smelling warmth and my lips were taken again.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Janelle whispered against my lips. That had me pausing.

“We don’t have to.” It would kill me to have to pull away now, but I would. There was something more here than just idle fancy. I didn’t want this to only last for a single night and I knew I needed to make sure she realized that. I didn’t want to leave anything to chance, not after already having been granted a second one. “I’m just happy enough that I saw you again.”

Janelle pulled away slightly, her hands shifting to clutch at my shoulders. Her tight grip had me locked in, and my own hands were firmly curled around the curve of her hips. She stared at me, brown eyes large and luminous in the harsh light of the suite.

“Make sure you don’t fall in love with me.”

It was such a random thing to say that I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Not a problem. According to my last girlfriend, I am emotionally unavailable. So, I think both of our hearts are safe.” She shook her head with a smile that didn’t seem to meet her eyes. “What? Did your ex give you the same diagnosis?”

“No. Quite the opposite,” she replied. “Apparently, I’m so emotionally available I drove her into the arms of another woman to get a break.”

She shrugged but it looked forced and totally out of place on her frame. I hated the ease at which she blamed herself for something completely out of her control. I couldn’t imagine what it meant to be too emotionally available. Did she cry all the time? My cousin, Madeline, was also a crier and any big emotion, no matter the cause, always came with a set of tears. I had watched Madeline sob her way through beating her bully’s ass in eighth grade and all it took was seeing the way that kid hit the ground still under a rain of tear-covered fists to know that crying didn’t equal weakness. She was a boxer now. No one was surprised when she won her first belt.

But from Janelle, I had only seen a fierce woman who didn't bend when faced with someone trying to take shots at her. If I were in her shoes, I probably would have turned tail and made my exit as soon as everything popped off. It took guts to stay and smile your way through it and that was another thing that drew me to her even more than her sweet smile and the laugh that warmed me from the inside.

"Well, I promise not to tell you I love you right now," I said finally. "But I refuse to let you go without knowing how fucking gorgeous you look."

It was a gamble to be so flippant after the conversation had strayed into heavy territory, but when her lips curled into a satisfied smile, I knew it had paid off. Janelle drew me closer again, eyes going half-lidded as her gaze dropped to my lips. I couldn't help but lick them, enjoying when her eyes followed that motion. The tension between us grew heavy again and I knew if she let me, I would make sure she left this suite beyond satisfied.

"You think so?" Her question was coy, and I chuckled when she batted her eyes at me. She didn't need to play the tease to keep me interested, but I had to admit I was enjoying this new side of her. I lifted my hand from her hip to curl around her cheek.

"Absolutely." I leaned in feeling her breath wash over my face. "As soon as I saw you, I wanted to drag you away so I could see just what was under this dress." I ran my other hand over her hip and around to cup a handful of her ass. The fabric was soft, but it was nothing compared to the supple heft of her in my hand. I pulled her in tightly sucking in a harsh breath when her breasts pressed against mine.

"You look so good in your suit," Janelle said, voice gone quiet. A hand slid over my collar and down to my chest. I shivered at the feeling of those fingers as they brushed a cloth-covered nipple. I had always had sensitive nipples, and I had a feeling once she realized that, she would exploit it fully. "Your legs looked so perfect I wanted to drape them over my shoulders."

Fuck. All gloves were apparently off now. "Not content to be a pillow princess?"

Janelle's soft laughter had my stomach flipping in arousal. "Not even a little. Though you are more than welcome to use the pillow to scream into if needed." My blood sang at the challenge. She was pushing all my buttons in every way. With a grunt, I wrapped my arms around Janelle's waist and lifted her up before walking towards the other set of doors.

Kisses rained down on my lips as she took my face in her hands. Each one was sucking and deep, sending pulses of sharp want through me. How I managed to make it in and get us to the bed without running into something, I will never know. My brain was in a constant loop of *'yes'* and *'more'* and it wasn't until I felt the first brush of her skin against mine that it came back online.

Janelle was down to her underwear, a matching set of black lingerie that made my mouth water with the need to taste. They were simple and yet enhanced everything I loved. I almost hesitated at unhooking her bra and drawing the material away, but I needed to feel every part of her. Once her breasts were bare, I buried my face in the valley between them taking in heaving breaths imprinting her scent in my blood. Her skin glowed under the light, and I traced my fingers around her nipples loving when they stood for me. At the first taste of them, I groaned closing my eyes as heat washed over me.

"Fuck," Janelle moaned her hands clutching at my hair. I felt her pull at the hair tie keeping my strands away. "I want to feel you all over me."

I couldn't answer, too hungry to pull away from her. Her nipple was perfect in my mouth and when I finally let go, it was only to pay equal attention to its twin. When she finally slid the hair tie off, I groaned again at the ease in pressure as waves of brown fell around me.

Janelle's grip pulled me back to her lips and I fell into them ravenously. This type of hunger was new to me, and I felt like I had never truly kissed or been kissed until this. I had slept with plenty of women, but she was different. Janelle was so much *more*.

Hands yanked at my undershirt, and I pulled it off unclasping my bra soon after. We shifted and moved, both frantically ridding ourselves of the last bit of fabric keeping us apart. When we came back together, it was

with me on my back and her perched on my hips. I could feel the heat of her on my skin and my mouth watered at the thought of having a taste. Would she be as sweet there as she was everywhere else? I had to know.

"Come here," I groaned out, gripping her thighs and guiding her up. She followed my directions so perfectly until I could see the wiry hairs hiding her pussy. The food at the wedding had looked and smelled amazing, but I knew they would pale in comparison to her. "Fuck. Let me see you."

Janelle moaned loudly, the sound dancing through the air. I changed my grip sliding my arms under her thighs so they could frame my head. From this angle, she blocked much of the light, but I could still see her glistening folds. Fingers brushed my lips, and I parted them to let them in. My eyes fluttered as I sucked on each digit enjoying the shivers my actions produced.

"Want you to ride my face, baby." I opened my eyes as her fingers slid out of my mouth. "Can you do that for me?"

She nodded almost frantically before lowering herself slowly. It was nice that she seemed concerned, but I wouldn't be satisfied until I had her weight bearing me down into the bed. I tightened my hold yanking her more fully until our lips met, my mouth and her cunt. My tongue wasted no time tasting a trail from her clit to her hole. I buried myself deep and tried not to shake apart at the force of her pleasure.

I didn't know how long I feasted, darting in and out in a parody of what I wanted to do with my fingers. At the thought, I did, bringing a hand up and pressing in with tongue and finger as Janelle's pussy clutched at me. Her hips moved in a sensual dance as she reveled in her pleasure. Soft gasps and cries rained down driving me to press deeper and move faster. I wanted to glut myself on her pleasure and I felt my own cunt grow wet with desire. The sound of a choked moan drifted down, and I opened my eyes to see her covering her mouth with her hand.

That just wouldn't do. I wanted—craved—hearing her pleasure. My own moans at her taste almost seemed to filter through her body until they were recycled and spit out from her own mouth. Forcing myself to lean away from her delicious cunt was a struggle.

“Move your hand.”

Janelle looked down at me, gaze hazy. “I can’t. I’m too loud.”

With a frown, I curled my fingers inside of her loving the shiver that pulsed through her and her leaked little whimper. “I don’t care. Those moans are mine. Be a good girl and let me hear them.”

Her thighs tightened around my head, but she didn’t fight. Her hand dropped away instead clutching at her own thigh. I smiled, pleased that I would once again get to enjoy the sounds from those sinful lips before returning to my feast. The slick sounds of my fingers as they thrust in and out were the perfect chorus to her freed groans. I almost wished I had thought to hit record on my phone so I could play this over again on the nights when I lied in bed alone. When Janelle’s moans took on a more frantic quality, I doubled my efforts, greedy to know what she sounded like when she came.

“I’m going to—” A cry cut off her words as Janelle’s hands clutched at the back of my head. Her hips lurched once and then twice as she seized against me. I never stopped my motion keeping it steady and milking every bit of her pleasure until all that was left were aftershocks up her spine. “Jesus.”

I eased my fingers and tongue out letting her fall slowly beside me. I had always been a breast girl and now was no different as I watched hers rise and fall with each panting breath. I reached out, cupping one and brushing my thumb over the still hard nipple. Janelle’s body jerked in response, but she didn’t push me away, instead rolling over until she was back on top, our legs tangled together.

“Should have known you’d be good with your hands,” Janelle said with a radiant smile. “Had no idea you had such a talented tongue though.”

“I’m just a bag full of tricks.” I kissed her then, loving the way she didn’t pull away instead gripping my chin and pressing deeper. The scent of her pussy on my lips had me craving more. Before I could make a move, I felt a hand in my hair gripping tightly and angling my head back. “Shit.”

She grinned sharply and I had to swallow back my groan. I had a thing for having my hair pulled, and her grip was perfect. As was the naked

thigh that slid between my legs and up against my pussy. I gripped at that thigh pressing it harder and moving my hips against it. The slick of my cunt made the move sensuous and when a finger slid over my clit, I damn near swallowed my tongue.

"You're so wet for me," Janelle crooned. "Did you like me riding your face that much?"

"Baby, you have no fucking idea," I replied. "I'd eat you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if I could."

Janelle looked pleased and even her kisses tasted delighted by my response. That wicked finger sliding against the lips of my pussy was joined by another and when they both slid into me, I couldn't hold back my gasp. I let my free leg fall open giving her all of me.

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7

Janelle

I had never felt such hunger in all my life. Seeing Alice so lost in pleasure as she ate me out with zest had me coming faster than I ever had. Now that I had her under me, her soft strands tangled in my fist, I wanted to make her see stars. I wanted to tattoo myself in her memory so that every time she touched herself, all she could feel and see was me. No one had ever tried to please me with such gusto and while that wasn't saying much given my small sampling of partners, it was still something that had me wanting to give my all.

Her lips were blood hot, soft and succulent as they pressed against mine and I took advantage when they parted ducking in with my tongue. Soft moans of pleasure danced around us, and I didn't even know who they were coming from. All I knew was that I wanted to hear more.

"Jesus," Alice gasped out when we separated to take a breath. Her cheeks were flushed with color, and I leaned down to feel that warmth against my own cheek. The grip of her pussy around my fingers was too damn perfect to be real and I slid them out and in again just to hear her groan into my ear. Her chest rose and fell with each deep breath, and I arched my back so our nipples could graze one another. I looked down then, enjoying the way our skin looked together shimmering slightly with sweat. The glide of our bodies was smooth and when I let more of myself rest against her, a hand shot out gripping my hip tightly. "Come down here."

I gasped when I fell into Alice, one of her thighs sliding between mine. We were in a feedback loop of pleasure as we moved again, our hips shifting as we fell into a rhythm together. The air between us was damp. The push and pull intoxicating as the slick sounds reached my ears. I couldn't stop myself from kissing Alice diving in again and again just to taste more of her. I bit softly on her bottom lip, shivering as she almost vibrated with the force of her moan. It was that sound that had me pushing harder letting my fingers guide us both to where we wanted to be.

“Come on. I want to see you come.” The growl in my voice was new, a hungry thing that wouldn’t be satisfied until it got what it wanted. My fingers followed its lead, thrusting in and pressing against her slick walls. If not for the thigh against me, I would have buried my hand between my own legs to soothe the ache in my own cunt. “Fuck, you are so beautiful.”

My words seemed to tug something deep in her because next thing I knew, a finger was caressing my own pussy lips until they found their target. I couldn’t stop myself from crying out. I pressed my forehead against Alice’s shoulder as a shudder ripped through me. This passion was blowing my mind leaving it blank except the thought of *more*. When another finger joined her first, I pressed sucking kisses to her neck.

“I know you didn’t think I was going to let you have all the fun,” Alice whispered her voice deeper than before. It threw another log on the fire of my desire, and I bit down on the bit of skin between my lips. “You trying to mark me?”

I leaned back ready to apologize. It was a dick move to leave marks when we never discussed things especially since she had been working, but when our gazes met, there was no admonishment there. Alice’s eyes were lidded and seasoned with the type of heat that I knew was reflected in my own. Her lips were bitten red and shiny with spit. It was damn near impossible to look at them and not fall back into them. Instead, I shifted, humming when her fingers curled inside me until I could press my lips against the valley between her breasts.

“Maybe,” I replied finally turning my head to look at one pebbled nipple. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No.”

“Good.” Conversation over, I made my move sucking that delicious tease into my mouth and humming at the taste. I wished I had hands free, but the thought was fleeting as I concentrated on her arousal. I made the decision to press in with a third finger the slick easing my way in as she relaxed further. Everything was wet heat, and I could feel myself tightening. I pushed the feeling back as I kissed her again, refusing to fall until she did. I wanted to watch Alice fall apart in my arms.

We seemed to have the same idea in mind as both our hands sped up. The muscles in my legs spasmed and when Alice gasped against my lips, that was it. I squeezed my eyes shut as rivers of pleasure poured over me. It was a lot like dying and being born again. Light and sound were amplified, and it took everything in me to keep pumping my fingers through Alice's orgasm. After a few moments, it was like both our strings had been cut and we sank deeper into the bed and into each other.

My breaths came out in wheezing pants and each subsequent spasm had me whining softly under their onslaught. It took a few moments to come back into myself but once I had, I slowly slid my fingers from the now familiar heat of Alice's cunt though everything in me wanted to remain there. Alice was quiet, her breath rushing in and out against my forehead. Her fingers were still in me and when they finally twitched and began to move, I had to force my thighs not to clench. Every nerve was sensitive now as I came down from that monumental high and I found myself with more questions than answers.

What happens now?

"That was amazing," Alice said before I could gather my courage to speak. I smiled at the guttural tone of her voice. I had done that. I had made her come hard enough to steal her breath. Even passing the bar hadn't felt this damn good.

"You're welcome," I said with confidence I didn't totally feel. I was used to faking it until I made it and while I never imagined having to use it in this way, I was still grateful for the skill. "I suppose we should get up. Kelly did send me up here for a reason."

Arms wrapped around my back when I attempted to move. I looked up at Alice. Her dark brown eyes were planted on me. The ruddiness in her cheeks hadn't gone away and I could still see a slight sheen across her forehead. Without thinking, I reached up tracing a thumb across her cheeks. When she turned and brushed her lips over the pad of my finger, I couldn't stop the small hum that left me. I was expecting her to get up, tell me this was fun and then high-tail it out of the room never to be seen again. I wasn't expecting her to dip her head down again and give me a kiss so sweet I melted against her.

“Alice,” I breathed out against her lips. I was suddenly struck with the fact that I didn’t want this to be the end. Maybe it was the wedding environment or the fact that it was Valentine’s Day. Maybe I was doing too much too soon. She and I had only met a day ago, but despite the logic of taking things slow, I wanted more. I didn’t want her to up and disappear from my life before I had a chance to try to make her mine, my own words be damned.

She smiled at me, light glinting off her perfect teeth. “Janelle. Can we—”

Her words cut off as the sound of beeps reached us. My shiver now had nothing to do with arousal and everything to do with fear. In a panic, I flipped over on the bed casting a panicked look at the bedroom door.

The *open* bedroom door.

Before I could think, Alice grabbed the sheets and my arm, pulling me to her and throwing the sheets over our naked bodies. I buried my face in her shoulder and waited for the inevitable.

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8

Janelle

Time seemed to stop as I looked up at the open door. For the first time since Alice and I fell in bed together, I wished I had thought to turn off the light. Even that little bit of cover may have kept my embarrassment at bay. But what was done was done and all I could do was bury my face in Alice's shoulder and wait for the inevitable screams to begin.

"Thank fuck you did what I told you to do."

Wait…what? That was not what I was expecting to hear from Kelly after finding Alice and me naked as a pair of mole rats in her bridal suite. When I looked up, I could tell from Alice's shocked expression that she felt the same. She glanced down at me brown eyes wide and unsure.

"Um…" she said voice trailing away as her gaze lifted back to where Kelly was no doubt standing in the doorway. I gathered the sheets and pulled them further over our bodies as the air slowly crept in. Now that we had stopped moving, my skin pebbled as I shivered and wondered just what the hell I had gotten myself into. This impulsivity wasn't the norm for me and now that it was over and done and I was staring the consequences in the face, I wasn't sure how I was supposed to handle everything.

"Kelly," I started. She was still in the doorway, her wedding dress the same cloud of sparkles haloed around her that it had been when she first walked down the aisle. I felt almost grotesque in her wake. "I am so sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Well hopefully she did," Kelly said pointing at Alice. "Over you, under you. Wherever as long as it happened. You better have come too. I can't stand you being so uptight anymore."

"I have no idea what is going on," Alice whispered. I nodded in agreement. I was similarly lost in how we had gotten here. "Maybe I should leave."

Kelly moved then, taking a few steps in the room, and holding her hand up. “No. You two need to stay and talk about all this. Hopefully, you’ll talk and then get back to whatever it is lesbians do in bed.” Unbelievably, I snorted as amusement colored my embarrassment.

Kelly’s grin widened as she turned to the closet. I glanced over at Alice taking in the look of confusion that I could feel slide over my own features. This situation was quickly wrecking my cool and I needed answers.

“Kelly, what are you doing?”

Kelly grunted before straightening and I saw a large duffel bag in her hands. She turned back to us, smile still in place.

“I’m grabbing the bag I packed for Mitch and me so we can move to the other suite I got. As much as I love you and am happy you finally got some, I am not going to go anywhere near that bed.”

“Other suite?” I asked softly frowning as I realized something. “Wait a minute. Did you plan this?”

“I didn’t plan for the original bar service to get sick, but when I saw Alice, I knew I had to do something drastic otherwise you might just let her pass you by again.”

“What?” I didn’t know what to say. “But Monica…surely that wasn’t planned?”

“That foolishness was all her. But I can’t deny that the timing was perfect.” Her grin took on a sly glint. “You’re welcome. Now,” she said hefting the bag onto her shoulder. “The room is booked until tomorrow at eleven. I suggest you two make plans to continue whatever this is beyond that. You did catch the bouquet after all.”

Shock had me frozen in place as Kelly sauntered back to the doorway. When she was nearly through it, she paused and looked at us again. “Oh, and Alice. If you fuck over my sister, I’ll make it look like an accident.”

Beside me, Alice let out a soft huff of laughter before an arm wrapped itself around my waist. I couldn’t help the way my body leaned

into her soaking in the warmth of that now familiar touch.

“That is nowhere in my plans for this one.”

Kelly nodded once sharply. “Good. Have fun you two!”

Before I could utter another word, she was back through the doorway, dress disappearing around the doorframe. I heard the front door in the living space close behind her and barely made out the sound of fading footsteps.

We were alone again. Alice’s arm was a welcome weight as I tried to understand what had just happened. “Did my sister just pimp me out to get a deal on drinks?”

Alice’s laughter was like a bright burst of sun, and I had to giggle when I realized what I had just said.

“Would you have gone along with it if she had tried that approach? To be fair, I hadn’t known I would see you here, though if I had, I might’ve tried it out.” Alice wiggled her eyebrows, and I pushed her away slightly. “I thought tonight was going to be a boring generic ceremony, but this has turned out better than I could have ever hoped.”

“Really?” My chest filled with warmth at her words.

She leaned down pressing her lips against my bare shoulder and I couldn’t stop the shiver that lanced through me. Now that we were alone again, I could feel the soft hum of arousal still singing beneath my skin.

“I had kicked myself for not getting your number.”

Relief filled me at Alice’s words. I was glad to know I wasn’t the only one who had been regretting not reaching out after our initial meeting. All I had to do was think back to how hard I had just come and yet how ravenous I still was for her touch to realize that this feeling probably wasn’t going away anytime soon. And I didn’t want it to. I wanted this all-consuming fire that Alice seemed to bring out. It felt good to break through and let the voracious feeling inside me feed.

“You should ask for it now,” I said softly as I watched the way her lips curled. I could almost taste her smile in the air like the most refreshing

breeze. When Alice's gaze met mine, fire coursed through me, and I knew we wouldn't be leaving the room anytime soon. There was no need. Mom had the key to my room and Kelly had clearly prepared for this by securing another suite. I had done my duties, catering to Kelly and making sure her wedding was everything she could dream of and more.

I was ready for more of my own reward.

Turning, I reached up and cupped Alice's cheeks drawing her lips up to mine. The kiss was firm, and I pushed into it like a woman starved. "Stay with me tonight."

Alice's hands covered mine and she grinned against my lips. "I have no desire to be anywhere else." She glanced down for a moment. "Well, other than between those thighs. I didn't get enough of a taste the first time."

"Fuck," I bit out before wrapping my arms around her shoulders. "I'm keeping you."

Alice's laughter was airy as I tumbled us back onto the bed. I knew I would eventually need to set an alarm to make sure we were up and out on time, but for now, I was content with the feeling of her in my arms as I drank from her lips again.

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Sipping & Swooning*! I hope you enjoyed reading Alice and Janelle’s tumble into new possibilities. I also have it on good authority there’s a chance you might see the two of them again in the future...

Look out for my upcoming release, *The 7-10 Split* out May 21, 2024, with Afterglow Books. As always, thank you for your support. It makes my writing possible!

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ABOUT KARMEN LEE

Karmen Lee is an author of diverse and queer adult contemporary and steamy romance. She's a single mom living it up in Atlanta, Georgia with her kid, her cats, and humidity. When she's not carpooling or packing lunches, you can probably find her enjoying a glass of wine and dreaming up ways to show her readers a good time.

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